

FAQ's – Week 1 & 2

These are some common questions I get for this segment of the course. Perhaps you have this same question and the answer will be helpful. Or perhaps you didn't even know you had a question but seeing it helps you refine your practice. If you have other questions, please email me directly. Happy practicing!

Q: How important is it to close your eyes while you practice mindfulness?

A: Mindfulness can be practiced with your eyes closed or open. Many people practice with their eyes closed because that helps them focus more. Many people practice with their eyes closed because it can help them stay more alert – especially people prone to daydreaming or when the mind is very busy. I also find that practicing with my eyes open allows me to practice anywhere at anytime without anyone knowing I'm doing it. I like disassociating mindfulness from one posture / form. With the eyes open you will be more aware of seeing more often. Try both and see what helps you stay more mindful.

Q: I live in a very noisy world. It's difficult to find a place without distracting noises. I will have to make my family more aware that this meditation is important.

A: We can practice mindfulness in any setting – that's what's great about it. Here are some suggestions on working with the course with your family, etc.

Let your family know you're practicing something new that you believe will benefit everyone and would love their support. Ask if during XX minutes they would be willing to hold their questions, etc. for you until you're done. You might meditate in your bedroom and put a note on the door indicating when you'll be free to interact. If you get interrupted you can pause, take a mindful breath, attend to what is happening and go back to the practice.

If it's really not possible to get quiet in your home (and we don't need total quiet – just enough to hear the instructions) can you practice in the midst of what is happening? If you're speaking with a child, can you notice "sound," and "seeing," and feel your body and how it responds to what they're saying. We want to keep our idea of practice flexible – it will serve our lives more widely that way.

Also notice your attitude about "distractions." Do you want things to be different than they are? Wanting it to be quiet? We can practice mindfulness in any setting. In the beginning it's important to support ourselves with quiet. But we don't want to get attached to that. That just sets us up to be stressed and dissatisfied when it's not the case. What's more important is how are we relating to what we're calling noise.

Q: At the beginning of the practice, when you observe the breaths in different parts of the body and are trying to decide which part to observe, what if two parts, say nose and abdomen, seem equally strong?

A: I remember when I first started that I wasn't sure where was the best spot to focus my attention. In the end, it doesn't really matter which spot you pick. If more than one spot is equally strong, just pick one of them. Then you can keep training your mind to feel the breath

at that spot. Often it's recommended to work with the attention at the abdomen - so if that's a comfortable spot for you, practice there.

Q: You say: try to keep your attention consistently in a given part of the body when breathing while being aware of your thoughts. I have chosen the diaphragm. But twice in the practice my attention shifted once to the sensations of throat (air passing through it) and once to those in the nose (fresh air in the beginning of the nose). Does that mean that I've been aware of the air passing in these two areas while keeping the attention on the diaphragm, or is that I've lost my attention to the diaphragm for a couple of seconds when "looking" at the throat and nose? Is it part of the process of being aware of the breathing?

A: This is great that you noticed your attention move to other sensations twice. Sometimes, when a sensation becomes dominant, our attention will shift there. If we notice that we can come back to our primary focus of attention - in this case the breath. Very advanced mindfulness practitioners notice that the mind can be aware of only one object at a time but their awareness is very subtle. For most of us, we can have the impression of being aware of more than one thing at a time – say the breath and the sensation of heat or coolness. There is no need to split hairs.

I think you're on the right track - you noticed your attention move and you came back to where you were focusing your attention, your diaphragm. That's what we do with mindful breathing, so happy continuation!

Q: As far as when a thought comes up and you notice it, when are you supposed to observe it versus going back to the breath?

A: Right now, as you begin the course, we recommend you notice the thought and then come back to the breath. We aren't so much observing the thought - just noticing that it's happening at this stage of practice. There will be more instructions later on working with thoughts, emotions, etc. but right now we're training the mind on the breath.

Q: I notice that my ability to concentrate on breathing during meditation or Yoga is lately very poor. As much as I like the silence in my head there seems never a shortage on thoughts.

A: Sometimes the mind is busy. What's important is not that it's quiet – but how relate to it. Can we notice a busy mind and let it be? Or are we fighting the way things are? Then we can notice the aversion and whatever contraction that may come with that. If we notice the aversion, can that be okay, too? Sometimes I simply note, "Not wanting," when the mind is busy and I can notice my aversion. That can bring me back to just noticing with more openness and curiosity.

Q: How can I download the recordings onto my iTunes? I would like to have them there in order to have easier access to them whenever I feel I could use some guidance.

A: When you click the button "Click to Play" to access the audio clip in the PDF, you will want to press pause on the audio. Then, using your browser's toolbar in the upper left hand corner click File, then click "Save As" or "Save Page As". This will open a Save As box and you can save the MP3 file in the file of your choosing. From there, you can plug in your MP3 player. Depending on your player, you might use iTunes, Windows Media Player or just go to the

driver itself, you will need to find the MP3 audio file and upload the usual way you would (usually click and hold the MP3 file and drag to the folder you want it to save in. You are also welcome to call Christina and she can walk you through it. Christina is in California at 510-535-6746.

Q: I have been practicing Transcendental Meditation for a few months, which involves the repetition of a personal mantra when you are doing the meditation or breathing practice, and I can't seem to switch off my mantra while I am doing the Mindfulness recordings and daily practice. Does this matter? Can I continue with my mantra or should I really try to focus on the "in, out" and other anchor words?

A: Yes – it does matter. TM focuses on calming and concentrating the mind to the exclusion of all other experience. The point of mindfulness is to notice what is happening – all experience (in the mind, body, etc.) – and be present to that in this moment. My suggestion is to follow the practice as outlined in the weekly lesson and for the duration of the course to let go of practicing TM. If you notice your mantra coming in, just note, “Mantra,” or something like that and come back to either the breath or the body – whichever lesson you’re working on at the time.

Q. I have noticed I feel some kind of pressure on my forehead when I am practicing and I am wondering if this is common. It is not painful at all, it is just very apparent and as I know that the frontal cortex is there (and that we work with it during Mindfulness) I was wondering if there could be a direct co-relation or if it is just coincidence.

A: First, great that you’re noticing sensations. And yes, it is common. We will notice, as we practice, all kinds of physical sensations. Our awareness gets refined and we perceive more than before. The key is not to make it into something. When this happens to me, sometimes there is a feeling that it means something - some sign that I’m special or something amazing is about to happen (I’m laughing at myself now!). If that happens, just notice it with a gentle attitude. You could note, “wanting.” And if your mind wants to start figuring it out (is it the PFC for instance), just notice thinking. It sounds like it doesn’t bother you. If it was to become more intense or you noticed you didn’t like it, you can notice your reaction to it. You can explore the sensations more thoroughly as well. What’s the pressure like – is it a hardness? A pulsing? Get curious.

Q: It became more difficult as the counting continued. Was doing fine until reaching 6 or 7 and found myself counting on the exhale and subsequently losing my place since I had been counting on the in breath.

A: Sometimes we can get tight around when to count the breath. When I first began counting – and sometimes even now – it can feel like I’m “on” the breath, a little bit like a security guard. When that happens and I notice it, I can take a breath to relax and start over. I like to think of the voice that’s counting as a gentle whisper from someone very kind.

Q: I practice with a group twice a week but my washing machine was going and the sound was distracting me or jarring me every now and then.

A: If you experience the sound of the washing machine as jarring or a distraction, see if you can notice it just as the process of hearing. Sometimes our mind wants to label certain

sounds as noise or unpleasant – that’s okay. But if we can notice that we do not like the sound, we can come back to the breath and each time we hear the sound again can simply note “hearing,” or “unpleasant,” and then come back to the breath again. If the aversion is strong, you can notice what that feels like – “ah, not wanting.” Where do you feel it in the body? Jaw tightens? Shoulders are tight? With practice you can see that any sound can come and go and you’ll have more space for it.

Q: I did not like to use the anchor words as I found it like mental work, like a thought. I have a question. Is it necessary to use these anchor words? What is the main purpose of them? To become more aware of your thoughts?

A: Great question. Some people connect with anchor words and some don’t. The purpose of the anchor is a bit like the purpose of an anchor on a boat. If the boat starts to drift too far away, the anchor will pull it back. If the mind starts to drift too far away and get lost in thought, the anchor words help bring it back to the object of attention.

It’s important that you keep the anchor words simple. Some people start to use many labels and then are more involved in labeling than in simply noting something and coming back to the breath. The point is to notice when your attention is drawn to something outside of your main object of attention (the breath in this case) so you can quickly come back to the main object. I like to keep it simple with just using the senses as anchor words in the beginning. For instance, any sound I will label “hearing” and I’ll use “touch” for any sensation and “feeling” for any emotion. You may want to see what words work best for you. Personally, I’ve found the anchor words to be a tool that helps me quickly get out of content and back to my main object of awareness. There’s a certain freedom in just noticing, “thinking,” and then coming back.

One outcome of using anchor words is that we notice how often thinking happens.

Q: Initially I used words that were too descriptive, such as when I heard a dog bark I said "bark", visualizing a dog. When I heard a child yell, I said "yell" and had a visual of which child on the block might be yelling. Thinking this labeling would be endless, I began to use neutral words such as sound, itch, thought.

A: Keep them simple. I like to use them to refer to which sense is activated. For instance, “hearing” can capture any sound or the act of hearing. Touch can be more neutral than itch and can apply to any sensation.

Q: It was very difficult to practice. My mind is racing at 6:30am. The day ahead at school is buzzing in my head already!

A: Is it okay that the mind is racing? The great thing about mindfulness is we can just notice what’s happening. Mindfulness isn’t set on a particular experience (a quiet mind, for example). It’s just to notice, “busy mind,” and then notice whatever comes next.

Q: The ease came and went. I began to imagine my 13-year-old son practicing mindful breathing with me, which led to me worrying about his relationship with his girlfriend, etc. I find that my mind wanders into my anatomy and observes how breath moves my insides. I then lose awareness of the breath itself.

A: Bringing images into the mind when we're practicing mindful breathing can be counter-productive. The mind will want to create a story about this, as the participant described above. When you notice that happening, you can use an anchor word like "Imagining," or "thinking" and then come back to the breath. Also, there is a difference between feeling the breath and imagining the breath. See if you can keep it simple and allow yourself to feel the sensations of the breath. In the beginning, as we're not used to it, it might be helpful to take a minute or two at the beginning and put a finger horizontally near your nose. What's the in breath like? Cool? Dry? What's the out breath like? Warm, moist? That might help anchor your attention. If you focus on the belly, putting your hand there in the beginning may also help.

Q: The walking practice was very hard as I find it difficult to find a time to slow my walking. I am always on the go and less successful in forcing myself to move mindfully.

A: We can be mindful at any pace. We suggest slow in the beginning so you can pay closer attention. But you can apply this at any pace. I find it quite easy sometimes, if my mind is busy, to walk faster. I have more to notice and it matches my energy. Experiment for yourself!

Q: The body and movement portion was very revealing for me. I became more aware of little things going on in my body. Little discomforts that I live with and tolerate, that I have been ignoring completely, because they live with me. I just tried to acknowledge them and move on. Is that the best way?

A: Yes, acknowledging the discomfort as you did is a good first step. Here are some other ways to work with it:

- Notice your relationship or attitude to it. Do you want it to go away? Do you contract when you encounter it? You can notice "aversion," or "not wanting."
- If it's not overwhelming, you can see if you can notice the sensations. "Pain," is how we label it with our mind, but what do you notice – pulsing, tingling, heat? Does it change? Get stronger, weaker, etc.?
- If it's overwhelming, it might not be wise to put your attention on it. Is there somewhere else in your body that feels comfortable or neutral? Often a place like an elbow or the cheeks or scalp is a place that can be neutral or even pleasant. Then, you can go to the other sensations periodically, to just notice.

We spend so much of our time avoiding pain and seeking pleasure that if we continue to do that in our mindfulness practice we'll reinforce the habit. If we can notice it, notice that we don't want it there or even notice we may get excited because it gives us something to focus on and work through, then our relationship to it opens up. We see that it changes – that what we're calling pain comes and goes. And that it doesn't need to be in the way of enjoying the moment.

Q: I found that mindfulness of the body is hard to apply when it comes to pain, even the mild pain that comes from working out. When it comes to the physical it is so instinctive to simply "react" to a stimulus vs. being mindful. I worked on this a bit but at some points had to cede that I'm a beginner and cannot entirely "observe" sensations yet!

A: See if you can notice not wanting the sensations to be there. As we begin, our ability to simply observe is not as strong as it becomes with practice. So, you can applaud yourself for noticing what you notice and then start again. With time you'll have more of an ability to observe without getting involved in the interpretation (I worked out too hard, I hope I haven't injured myself, etc.) and notice the sensations with an open curiosity.

Another thing about "pain" is that it can really help us stay focused. It can command our attention in ways the breath might not. So use it to your advantage to help you keep coming back to the moment but be gentle, too.